

Integrating Theology & Mission in the Cross-cultural Ministry Center (CMC)

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With contributions from Joel Rockemann & Carlos Velazquez

Introduction

How does one go about forming pastoral, missional leaders? That question is part of a larger ongoing conversation about the appropriate relation between theology and mission.¹ In this article, I attempt to get at that question and add to the conversation. I do that by giving the reader a glimpse of how one pastoral education program—the Cross-cultural Ministry Center at Concordia University Irvine—strives to integrate theology and mission with the goal of forming what we often refer to as “missionary pastors.”

In what follows, I briefly describe the Cross-cultural Ministry Center, lay out the theoretical framework undergirding the curriculum, explain our educational model, and try to show how this plays out practically in our coursework and through the CMC missional vicarage (i.e., internship) experience. Then, two recent graduates of the Cross-cultural Ministry Center, Pastor Joel Rockemann and Pastor Carlos Velazquez, will offer personal reflections on their current ministries and describe how their time in the program helped prepare them for the mission contexts in which they now find themselves.

What is the Cross-cultural Ministry Center?

The Cross-cultural Ministry Center, often called the CMC, is a partnership between Concordia University Irvine and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis designed to offer a graduate level seminary program that forms “missionary pastors” for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. This partnership traces back to the mid-nineties and is in its twenty-eighth year. As part of that partnership, the CMC has been modeled after the M.Div. program at Concordia Seminary, but with an intentional mission focus



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aimed at forming pastors with the necessary missionary skills and habits of thought and practice to *cross cultures* and *reach the lost* with the Gospel in their communities.

In many ways, these two phrases—“crossing cultures” and “reaching the lost”—sum up the work of the “missionary pastor.” They directly respond to two recent phenomena that are greatly reshaping the context of American Christianity: an increasingly *multicultural* society and an increasingly *unchurched* society. Both these phenomena present the church in the United States with an almost unprecedented opportunity and call for pastors who are deeply grounded in biblical and theological understanding and yet also equipped with specialized missionary skills. An increasingly *multicultural* society calls for pastors to be adept at “crossing cultures” more so than ever before. And an increasingly *unchurched* society calls for pastors to be skilled at “reaching the lost” like never before.

The CMC and the Interrelation Between Theology and Mission

In responding to these two phenomena, any pastoral formation program and, for that matter, the church in general, is continuously tempted to fall into two opposite unhelpful and unbiblical extremes. The first emphasizes the importance of theology to the exclusion or trivialization of mission. The second stresses the importance of mission to the exclusion or trivialization of theology. Almost all pastors, as well as those studying for the pastoral office, feel this tension and are inclined to focus on one more than the other. Some are enthusiastically inclined toward the academic study of theology and less engaged in the day-to-day mission of the church to the lost. Others are thoroughly enthused by outreach into their communities and less engaged in the pursuit of theological understanding.

As much as possible, the CMC attempts to avoid these extremes because such an approach wrongly dichotomizes theology and mission. It mistakenly treats them as somehow opposed to one another. Rather, the CMC attempts to help students view theology and mission as existing in an inextricable, indispensable interrelation such that each is rendered impossible without the other. That relation can be described as such: *Theology serves as the impetus for mission and mission provides the context for theology.*

This is essentially what the old missiologists at the turn of the twentieth century meant when they claimed that “mission is the mother of theology.”² They recognized that theology is true because it is drawn from Scripture and that such theology inevitably fosters, advocates, and propels the theologian into mission practice. At the same time, that mission practice, where theology crosses boundaries and engages the world, inevitably drives the missionary back to Scripture and further theological reflection.

The Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans is a great example of this. In that letter, the doctrine of justification propels Paul to extend his missionary activities to the known ends of the earth because they must hear the good news to have faith and be saved (Rom 10). Simultaneously, the mission to Spain provides the occasion and context for him to further expound on the topic of justification (Rom 3–4) and its relation to other areas of Christian doctrine (Rom 6–9) and practice (Rom 12–14). It is hard to imagine we would have the book of Romans and its insightful analysis of

justification grounded in Genesis 15 apart from Paul's missionary activities and his desire to embark on a missionary journey to Spain.³

Hence, theology and mission go hand in hand. The interrelation could be illustrated as a never-ending circle with each feeding into the other. But perhaps it would be better seen as a helix: theology engenders mission, which, in turn, leads towards greater theological understanding, which, in turn, engenders greater engagement in mission, which, in turn, leads towards even greater theological understanding, which, in turn, leads to even greater engagement in mission, and so on and so forth. Theology and mission continually cultivate each other in a kind of symbiotic relationship, each playing its distinct role, never static, but spiraling upward towards greater levels of understanding and engagement.

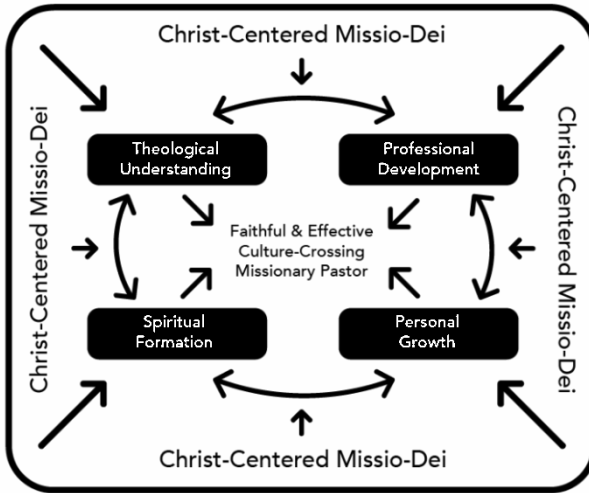
In the CMC, this interrelation between theology and mission is often likened to the relation Martin Luther established between *meditatio* (deep study of God's Word) and *tentatio* (life's trials and tribulations) when he described the best way to form theologians. Mission practice, that is, confessing one's faith across boundaries and striving to do so in such a way that it will be heard and understood, inevitably gives rise to tensions, trials, and tribulations (*tentationes*). These drive the theologian back into prayer and a deeper study of God's Word. But it never ends there because that deeper theological reflection steeped in God's Word propels the theologian back into engagement with the world through mission practice. And so on. In the CMC, much of the *meditatio* happens in the classroom. The CMC Missional Vicarage (see below for a fuller explanation) often occasions the *tentationes*.

Hence, when kept integrally together, theology and mission form and shape what we refer to in the CMC as the "missionary pastor."

The CMC Educational Model

How does the interrelation of theology and mission look when it comes to the CMC curriculum? If one were to diagram the CMC's approach to theological education, it might look something like this:

CMC Educational Model



The outer frame represents the Christ-centered Missio Dei (i.e., God’s work to save all people centered in the person and work of Christ Jesus). This integrative missiological orientation shapes and permeates the entire curriculum and every aspect of the CMC.

That curriculum is made up of four major learning areas that contribute to the formation of the *faithful & effective culture-crossing missionary pastor*:

- Theological Understanding
- Professional Development
- Spiritual Formation
- Personal Growth

Although separated in the diagram, in reality the four learning areas are closely interrelated and interdependent (hence the connecting arrows).

Integrating Mission into Coursework

Much of the Theological Understanding component takes place through the academic courses. The coursework of the CMC program is similar to that of a typical M.Div. program in terms of the types of courses, the number of semester hours, and the graduate level at which they are taught. However, we attempt to bring in a missiological emphasis in two distinct ways.

First, to the extent possible, professors are encouraged to bring out the missiological dimension in their various courses, whether systematic, historical,

exegetical, or practical. Students are also expected to do the same, bringing to bear on their courses what they are experiencing through the CMC Missional Vicarage experience (see below).

Of course, this happens in some courses (e.g., Pastoral Theology) more so than in others (e.g., Greek). And some faculty are more adept at this than others. In any case, the idea is to continuously work toward a curriculum that intentionally leads students to a deeper understanding of God's Christ-centered Mission and how it relates to every aspect of theology such that mission and theology are intricately connected.⁴ A few examples may serve to illustrate how this is done. In their Old Testament Isagogics course, students write a paper on the *Missio Dei* as found in the Old Testament. In their course on World Religions, students actually visit local worship sites of the various religions they are studying, interact with local religious leaders, and reflect on ways they might engage with and share the Christian faith with others from different religious backgrounds. In their course on Reformation History, students write a final paper answering the question, "How does the theology of the Lutheran reformers flow naturally into Christian witness and outreach to the lost?" And in their Lutheran Confessions course, students write a final concluding section to a major paper in which they explain how the various confessional statements are inherently missional. They then draft a statement of "What We Believe" to be put up on their church's website aimed at those outside of the church. These are but a few examples.

Secondly, students take courses specifically aimed at forming in them missionary habits of thought and practice. These include courses such as *Ministry in Cultural Context*, where students learn to view religion from a sociological/anthropological perspective with the goal of ministering to people from various cultural backgrounds, and *Theology and Practice of Mission*, where students develop a biblical theology of mission and explore how one crosses cultures and socio-economic levels with the Gospel. About halfway through the program, students also take two important courses, *Entrepreneurial Mission Planting* and *Mission Planting Institute*, that prepare them to successfully launch a new ministry during their vicarage (see below).

Integrating Mission into the CMC Vicarage (Internship)

Much of the learning in the remaining three learning areas—Professional Development, Spiritual Formation, and Personal Growth—happens through what has come to be called the CMC Missional Vicarage.

This vicarage (as it is called in the LCMS) is a required four-year internship at a local congregation and under the mentorship of a pastor during which students grow personally, spiritually, and professionally as pastoral and missionary leaders. Every semester, students submit a personal growth plan, a spiritual formation plan, and a professional development plan in which they articulate goals related to ministry activities such as preaching, teaching, visiting, administration, etc. Then they carry out these activities and journal their progress throughout the semester.

The CMC Missional Vicarage, per its name, is also specifically designed to help students acquire missionary habits and skills. One of these habits is to resist the tendency to focus on "internal activities" aimed at those within our church community and to neglect those "external activities" aimed at engaging those outside of our

church. There is, of course, quite a bit of overlap between the two and both are necessary. But most church leaders, including CMC vicars, find themselves pulled toward “internal activities” and away from “external activities.” Why? Because there are normally not as many structures of accountability for the latter. For example, if a pastor doesn’t show up to preach Sunday morning, he’ll certainly hear about it. But if he doesn’t take time every Tuesday morning to do a prayer walk through the Latino community behind his church, most likely no one will say anything.

This is one reason the CMC vicarage is a bit more “regimented” than what might be considered a traditional vicarage or internship. It attempts to set up some structures of accountability for those external mission-focused activities. For this reason, every semester CMC vicars also create goals related to externally focused mission activities such as language and cultural learning, community awareness and ministry, mission awareness and leadership, and reaching the unchurched.

Additionally, the capstone project of the CMC engages students in mission. About halfway through the program, students take the two specific courses mentioned above, *Entrepreneurial Mission Planting* and *Mission Planting Institute*. These courses prepare students to study their communities, plan, and then launch a new ministry that crosses a significant cultural barrier into a non-Anglo or heavily multi-cultural milieu, and reaches people outside of the church in the surrounding community. Students then launch their new ministries, revising and creating new goals that they work to accomplish every semester and submitting end of the semester progress reports. This new culture-crossing ministry start serves as the capstone project of the CMC. The plan, progress reports, and a final reflection paper are included in the student’s final vicarage portfolio, along with several other artifacts from their time in the CMC.

The Perspective of Two Former CMC Students

The intended result of the CMC curriculum and simultaneous vicarage program is to form Lutheran pastors who are *rooted* in Scripture, *confessional* in their theology, and *embedded* in their communities while *creatively and adaptively carrying out the Mission of the Church*.

In what follows, two graduates of the CMC describe their background, their current ministry contexts, and how their time in the CMC contributed to shaping them into pastoral, missional leaders.

Joel Rockemann, Missional Pastor, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Tracy, CA

I serve as missional pastor at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Tracy, CA, a city east of San Francisco Bay that lies in the heart of California's Central Valley. While agricultural work is an important theme of the Central Valley, the city of Tracy is unique because it is also a “commuter” town from which many people travel to the Bay Area daily for tech jobs in Silicon Valley. Tracy has a less expensive cost of living than the Bay Area, and as a result most of its population is middle to lower middle class. These nuances serve as a catalyst for immigrant families looking to cultivate a safe and secure life in the United States and contribute to the wonderfully diverse

group of people who call Tracy their home. Because our congregation feels very strongly that the good news of Jesus is for all people, we believe that our congregation ought to reflect the diverse community we serve.

Before accepting the call as missional pastor at St. Paul's, my family had been serving as missionaries in Haiti. Though we had done plenty of short-term mission work in Haiti for about ten years, our time living in-country and working at an orphanage/neonatal care facility in the Kenscoff mountains north of Port au Prince highlighted the importance of being able to speak the local language with confidence. What would often be the simplest of tasks (e.g., negotiating transportation fees, shopping for food, meeting neighbors, communicating with coworkers) was often a stressful challenge until we became fluent enough to navigate these tasks without a translator. Through language classes and immersive training, we learned the local dialect of Haitian Kreyol to the point where we were able to advocate for ourselves and our Haitian coworkers and friends. We were ultimately able to do everything from shopping at local markets for better prices, to empathizing more deeply with the joys and sorrows of our Haitian brothers and sisters, to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the people with whom we had built relationships. This led also to many conversations with our Haitian coworkers about their desire to learn English. As a result, I built and began teaching an ESL class there, a challenging task which I came to love.

Upon returning to the United States, I became much more aware of local immigrant populations' difficulties in navigating the nuances of our predominantly English-speaking culture. I felt like I better understood their angst for communicating well, and I wanted to help meet their need. As a result, in coordination with our church and as my capstone vicarage project in the Cross-cultural Ministry Center, we worked to launch a free adult English language class that would be held on our church and school campus during our family ministry nights.

That new ministry continues and has become invaluable for connecting our church to our diverse immigrant communities around us. Our goal is to empower people to effectively navigate a predominantly English-speaking culture and to forge trust-filled, lasting relationships with our language students and their families. In addition to the free instruction, each class provides free childcare, and we prepare and share a free meal prior to the beginning of each class. The childcare and meal preparation are all done by our church families, which has been a great way of facilitating further connection between church and student families.

The CMC program was the seminary training that I needed to be able to effectively minister in our diverse cultural context. I recall especially a class taught by Dr. Jack Schultz called, *Ministry in a Cultural Context*, where we focused on the reality that having an anthropological understanding of how people's faith and culture interact is critical for all Christians, and especially important for missionary pastors. How we minister and interact with the diverse people in our community will either attract or repel them from wanting to have a relationship with us. An effective missionary pastor must care about understanding (i.e. *standing among*) people with whom he desires to share the Gospel. It is important for us to learn how the world looks from the *other* person's perspective in order that we might better understand the

cultural system in which that person is situated. This helps give us the knowledge and discernment required to effectively love our neighbor (Phil 1:9–11).

The CMC program and its faculty also do a great job of combining excellent theological instruction with immediate application. Because the CMC vicarage program runs concurrently during the four-year CMC course of study, what CMC students learn in class immediately fuels the work that they are doing in ministry and mission on a daily basis. I found that the vicarage experience was integral to my formation as a missionary pastor. In addition to preparing me for the work of preaching, teaching, and walking alongside God's people on a daily basis, the CMC vicarage also helped me navigate the process of launching a meaningful culture-crossing ministry. From researching the various needs of the community, to drafting and refining a focused mission and vision blueprint, to growing a team and generating support, my time as a CMC vicar was the proving ground for building our free adult English ministry focused on serving immigrant adults in our surrounding community.

Finally, whereas the *Theology & Practice of Mission* course certainly spearheads the effort, I was always impressed by how well the entire CMC course framework instills in us students the focus of “Gospel-motivated” mission work. One of the greatest challenges in spreading the Gospel is helping our people realize that in following Jesus they are also privileged to participate in God's mission, not as a matter of Law, but as a matter of Gospel. Our motivation for reaching others with the good news of Jesus Christ comes, first and foremost, from recognizing that we ourselves have been freed by the very same Jesus. Being set free from the bondage of sin and death is the greatest motivation we have for proclaiming Christ to those who do not yet know Him as Lord and Savior. To that end, the Holy Spirit uses Christ's Gospel work in us to propel us forward in proclaiming the same Gospel to others and in lovingly providing for the needs of our neighbor.

This “Gospel-motivated” approach to mission instilled in me while in the CMC has also shaped the way we've developed our English language ministry and other mission activities. Everyone in our congregation is apportioned certain gifts and is privileged to use these in service to God's mission. Through my time in Haiti and in the CMC I have realized, for example, that I am gifted at teaching English to groups of people who have varied first languages and cultural backgrounds. But we have also built numerous ways for others from our congregation to be involved in this English language ministry by cooking and/or serving food, helping with childcare, financially supporting our work by purchasing classroom supplies, meeting a specific need of one of our student's families, and the list goes on. We all play our unique part propelled

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forward by the same work of Christ on our behalf. This fosters a sense of unity as we learn together, laugh and cry together, pray and eat together, and now, by God's grace, in ones and twos, slowly but surely, worship together.

I truly believe that the CMC faculty has been instrumental in my formation as a missionary pastor who loves cultivating and encouraging beautifully unique and diverse people to “[devote] themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

**Carlos Velazquez, Assistant Pastor, St. Paul Lutheran Church, Orange, CA
(Transcribed and edited from an interview)**

I currently serve as assistant pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Orange, CA and am the lead pastor of St. Paul Español, the Hispanic ministry and outreach of St. Paul Lutheran Church. In that role, I lead the Spanish services in Word & Sacrament ministry, lead Bible studies, and care for the members of our Latino community at St. Paul.

I’m also involved in strategizing for continued outreach into the Latino community around us. We have several outreach initiatives that we’re involved in. We’ve organized school supply drives and Christmas toy drives. We offer bilingual music classes for the community, open up our campus for youth to play sports, and partner with St. John’s Lutheran Church to provide support and care for foster families, most of which are Hispanic. We also partner with Charity on Wheels to provide clothing, food, and basic care for poverty-stricken people, including a time of fellowship and worship.

I’ve also been blessed to help found a Hispanic Circuit in the Pacific Southwest District and currently serve as a “visitor” for that circuit. The goal of this circuit is to bring together and encourage Hispanic leaders in our district, who are otherwise scattered and often isolated, and to encourage and resource new Hispanic ministries. This also includes identifying and training up the next generation of Hispanic leaders.

The Cross-cultural Ministry Center really helped to prepare me for my current ministry. But let me back up and share a bit about my background and how I came to the CMC. I grew up in Mexico City. My mother was Roman Catholic and my father was evangelical. I was baptized as a baby but didn’t go to church much as a child. When I was a teenager, my uncle witnessed to us about his journey out of addiction and into Christianity. As a result of that, I started going to church with him. The church we attended was of a more conservative Pentecostal background. I attended that church regularly for several years and was a part of their youth group, along with Samuel Gomez and Zabdi Lopez (both of whom also graduated from the Cross-cultural Ministry Center in the early 2000’s).

However, during college, I ended up leaving the church again. It wasn’t until I finished college with a degree in law and had started working for some companies that I returned to the church. To make a long story short, my life collapsed in on me and, as a result, it drove me back to the church. After I met my wife in 2005, the pastor of the Christian Missionary Alliance church we were attending encouraged me to become a pastor and, at that time, I started looking into the possibility of going to seminary. But for some reason or another, I put it off and focused on my career as a lawyer.

Finally, after several years, my wife and I made the decision that I would go into full-time ministry.

It was then that Pastor Sam Gomez introduced me to the Cross-cultural Ministry Center. Pastor Sam had graduated from the CMC much earlier and had launched Grace Latino Ministries, a ministry that worked with existing Lutheran congregations throughout the Pacific Southwest District of the LCMS to plant Hispanic churches. In 2014, I came to the States with Pastor Sam and had my first conversation with Dr. Fluegge, Director of the CMC. I had also started reading up on Lutheran theology and decided that this was the direction in which God was calling me.

So I moved to the States with my family in 2015 and began working with Pastor Sam and Grace Latino Ministries with a Hispanic church plant that Pastor Sam had previously started at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Orange, CA. My English was not great, so I spent six months in intense ESL classes at Concordia University Irvine before starting the CMC program in 2016.

The CMC provided me with a solid and firm theological education which served as the foundation for my future ministry. Since I was not coming from a Lutheran background, I really appreciated the gifted professors who helped me understand the riches of Lutheran Reformation theology that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. I valued, for example, my homiletics class and how it taught me how to distinguish Law and Gospel in a distinctly Lutheran way. At the same time, I appreciated how my professors understood our future vocations as missionary pastors and how they balanced between systematic and pastoral theology, while also bringing in the cultural relevance of the various theological topics we covered. As far as culture and missions, I remember especially the class *Ministry in Cultural Context*, which taught us to understand human beings as cultural beings. This was important for my ministry, especially as I often found myself navigating and serving as the bridge between the larger English-speaking congregation and our much smaller Hispanic ministry. I learned from the course *Pastor as Missionary* that the Great Commission of Matthew 28 is part of the much larger narrative of God's mission for our salvation as revealed throughout the entire Bible with Christ at its center as the ultimate missionary.

During my CMC vicarage, I worked first with Pastor Sam of Grace Latino Ministries and then with Pastor Christenson, lead pastor at St. Paul, to help launch and develop the Hispanic church and ministry there at St. Paul Lutheran Church. My new ministry launch during my vicarage was to continue building up that ministry, not only leading the services on Sunday, but also exploring various ways to reach into the community throughout the week, connecting with members and reaching new people as well. We encountered many challenges. When President Trump was elected there was concern and worry within the broader Hispanic community. I had to calm the fears of my Latino brothers and sisters and also navigate between the Anglo and Hispanic congregations. COVID-19 also presented us with numerous challenges. But by God's grace we made it through and are stronger because of it. All of this happened through the CMC vicarage and was an important part of my formation as a Lutheran pastor.

In short, my entire experience in the CMC prepared me to carry out my duties as a pastor, teaching and confessing Lutheran theology, while always aware of the social realities and challenges of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

How does one go about forming pastoral, missional leaders? This article has provided a glimpse at how one pastoral education program responds to this question and especially how it seeks to integrate mission and theology. For more information, visit www.cui.edu/cmc.

ENDNOTES

¹ The conversation about the relation between theology and mission lies at the center of the debate over how one integrates mission into theological education. Many solutions have been proposed over the years. See, e.g., David Bosch, “Theological Education in Missionary Perspective,” *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (1982): 13–34; Andrew Kirk, *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997); Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999).

² See, e.g., Martin Kähler, “Die Mission – ist sie ein unentbehrlicher Zug am Christentum?” in *Schriften zu Christologie und Mission: Gesmtausgabe der Schriften zur Mission Mit einer Bibliographie*, ed. Heinzgünter Frohnes (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, [1908] 1971), 190: “Die älteste Mission wurde zur Mutter der Theologie.”

³ This is not to say that Paul created the doctrine of justification to justify his mission activity or defend racial inclusivism, as the New Perspective on Paul often does. It does not seem to me that the doctrine of justification is peripheral or incidental in Paul’s thinking, but rather central and foundational. See Mark Seifrid, “The ‘New Perspective on Paul’ and Its Problems,” *Themelios* 25, no. 2 (2000): 4–18. However, his missionary journeys do provide the occasion for his expositions on justification in both Romans and Galatians.

⁴ For the sake of full disclosure, we are still quite far from achieving the goal of integrating mission into all of our courses in the CMC. It is definitely still a work in progress and, I believe, we have a ways to go. There are numerous challenges, including the lack of textbooks that integrate mission into the various theological subjects and limitations of faculty whose expertise and interest may lie elsewhere than missiology. One solution would be to create “course guidebooks” for every course with set textbooks, outcomes, and assignments that would emphasize the course’s missiological dimension. Of course, this would require widespread faculty cooperation and support.